RIDLEY WILLIAMS, EARLY QUEENSLAND PASTORALIST

[By K. T. CAMERON]

(Read at a meeting of the Society on 22 October 1959.)

The two Williams Brothers (father and uncle of Ridley Williams) were the first squatters in the lower Warrego in Queensland, although the river had been earlier settled in the neighbourhood of Bourke in New South Wales. Eighteen hundred and sixty was the year of their arrival.

John Williams and his brother secured an area of country they named Coongoola (the aboriginal name for the two-miles-long waterhole near which the homestead was built). There was not then a single mile of railway in Queensland. Surat, 250 miles away, where a magistrate and native police station had been established earlier, was the nearest administrative centre in the Colony. Their means of securing supplies was by river barge to Bourke, 190 miles south. The river traffic already was established to take the wool from the stations along the Darling.

Coongoola, first known as Williams' station, is 33 miles north of the present town of Cunnamulla.

This was the first settlement Landsborough found after his overland trip from the Albert River, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, arriving there in June 1862. In his journal, a copy of which is in the library here, he writes of the hospitable welcome the Williams gave him on his arrival.

The Williams could have gone down in history as the rescuers of Burke and Wills. In 1861 they made a trip to the then unexplored Cooper's Creek region as squatters interested in the pastoral possibilities of the country, and unknown to either party were only a few miles from the distressed explorers returning from the Gulf of Carpentaria.

John Williams was a personal friend of Captain Sturt (first navigator of the Murray), and while visiting Williams at Gol Gol station in New South Wales, the captain presented him with his sword which was in possession of the Williams family for many years.

Ridley Williams, with whom this paper is principally concerned, was born at Gol Gol, New South Wales, in 1850, and with his brothers Robert and James was brought to Queensland at an early age. Coongoola itself was sold by the Williams brothers in 1878 to a client of the London Chartered Bank.

In the middle 'seventies the younger Williams (Ridley and his brothers) acquired blocks of country on Beechal Creek (a tributary of the Paroo River). These blocks were Fairlie, Mumberry, Haredean, Pengine and Bierbank. Under the new Land Act in 1880 all these leases were consolidated under the name of Bierbank, or as it was first known, Ingringbar, area 1,200 square miles.

They had for a time a partner associated with them, a man named Dreyer. Bierbank was stocked with Shorthorn cattle and a considerable number of horses, both blood and draught, of a very high standard were raised.

James Williams owned at different periods the noted sires Orator and Mandarin. It is possible that at this period the returns from the sales of their horses were as great as the return from their cattle.

Ridley Williams and his brothers could be described as typical pastoralists of their time. Without being extravagant they were open-handed free spenders. Being all horse lovers they were keen racing men and were regarded as true sportsmen. Their horses competed at all the local race meetings, Charleville, Cunnamulla, Adavale, Thargomindah, and as far distant as Bourke, New South Wales. Jim Williams was the most noted and successful in this field.

After the consolidation of Bierbank, Ridley seems to have become the chief manager. In the early 'eighties cattle properties were not a very profitable investment. Far distant Wodanga, on the Victorian border, was the chief selling centre of the three eastern colonies.

In the bountiful seasons following the 1877 drought herds increased and outstripped the demand. The overseas frozen beef trade had not been developed and was yet only a pleasant fancy. Cattle numbers were rapidly increasing and stations were becoming overstocked with no means of the owners disposing of them.

Northern Territory Market

There was, however, one market available for female cattle. Pastoralists, principally from South Australia, had in recent years acquired large holdings in the Northern Territory suitable only for raising cattle. These landholders were anxious to buy cows to establish herds, and Queensland was the most plentiful supply. There was, however, one obstacle—the Northern Territory was a long way away and lacked well-watered stock routes.

Under a scheme commenced 30 years ago by the Federal and State Governments conjointly, Government watering facilities, either sub-artesian bores or dams, have been established every ten miles on the principal stock routes. These conditions, of course, did not exist in 1880.

In 1882, Ridley Williams, who as well as being a competent stockman was also an astute businessman, negotiated a sale of 2,000 cows to the Barrow Creek Pastoral Company. The purchase price is believed to have been £2/10/- per head, a very satisfactory figure at that time.

A clause in the agreement, however, provided that Williams must deliver them at Simpson's Gap Station, which was situated 35 miles south-west of Alice Springs. "The Alice," as it was then called, was only a repeating station on the Overland Telegraph. He (Williams) must have realised that the successful delivery of those cattle would be no simple task.

The distance from Bierbank to Simpson's Gap was 750 air miles, but the route by which the cattle must travel would be at least double that distance. Moreover, the country from the Queensland-Northern Territory border to the Overland Telegraph was unexplored and known to be inhabitated by hostile blacks.

The cattle left Bierbank in April 1883 in two mobs of 1,000 each. Williams in his diary tells us the men with each mob had a dray and a strong team of eight draught horses, as well as 25 head of saddle horses with each mob of cattle. There would be at least five men with each mob—a cook, a horse tailer, two men to drove the cattle, and the "boss" drover.

From Williams's diary it is possible to reconstruct the route the cattle followed. At the beginning of the trip they would travel up Beachel Creek and by its most northerly tributary, Pingine Creek, cross the low water-

shed on to the head of Gumbardo Creek, thence to Adavale on the Bulloo River waters. This would be a well-watered track and free from stony country. The most favoured route then was across the Grey Range down Powell's Creek on to the Barcoo across to the Thomson River, thence up Vergemont Creek and across on to the Mayne River. This would give them a reasonably well-watered track all the way. The two mobs were in charge of Charles Lowe and his brother Frederick.

Outbreak of Pleuro

In June, Charles Lowe, "head" drover of the first mob, wired Williams that pleuro, the dreaded scourge of travelling cattle in those days, had broken out amongst the cows. Williams, with one of his employees, at once left Bierbank, travelling by horseback with four spare horses, and a pack-horse, to overtake the cattle. He did not know that he would not see Bierbank again for 20 months.

Williams caught up with his cattle on Diamantina Lakes Station. He found them in a very bad condition with pleuro and was given permission by Jim Shaw, manager for J. A. Macartney, to build a yard on the Mayne and inoculate the cattle. As cattle cannot with advantage travel immediately after inoculation he was also allowed to spell them for six weeks.

This was before the days of cultivated virus. The cattleman had to obtain his own. An affected beast was shot, propped up on its brisket, bled, the shoulders removed, the virus taken from the exposed lungs, and bottled.

To-day, it is possible per medium of air services to be supplied by the Department of Agriculture and Stock with virus anywhere in Queensland in 48 hours.

Williams lost several hundred beasts from the disease before he moved on. He crossed from Diamantina River by the famous "Pot Jostler Track," passed the present Springvale Station to the Hamilton River, thence on to the Bourke River and up the Georgina River to Idamere (now Glenormiston). Idamere (or Glenormiston) was managed by Mr. Lamond for the Bank of New South Wales, who had recently foreclosed on it. It was formerly owned by the Skuthorpe family. Skuthorpe (senior) had, a few years previously, caused quite a stir by declaring he had found relics of the explorer Leichhardt, but he refused to have his alleged

discovery publicly investigated.[1] (There is reason to believe that Lamond was a brother of Sub-Inspector Lamond of the Native Police, who was the father of Mr. H. G. Lamond, the author.)

Leaving the Georgina River, he travelled up Linda Creek towards the Queensland-Northern Territory border, which was then unmarked. On Linda Creek he found sufficient water and grass to hold his cattle.

Across the Desert

Williams was now poised for the dash across the little-known desert to the Overland Telegraph, 360 miles to the westward. Before he could move forward he had to wait for a fall of good rain, and it also was necessary to explore the country ahead to ensure that sufficient water was available for his herd. The Toko (or Tarlton) Range further north, sometimes called the Jervois, had to be crossed and a way found to the Marshall on to the Waite and Plenty Rivers.

On Christmas Day, 1883, in the Toko Ranges, Williams came upon a tree marked C.B. by W. Carr Boyd ("Pot-Jostler")[2] some years previously. He was correspondent for the "Queenslander." The season proved to be unfavourable, and Williams spent many months looking for a more suitable place to maintain his cattle; he searched as far south as the head of the Mulligan. During the search in this area, he visited a small waterhole on the head of the long Alnageer watercourse. It was from this waterhole some years previously that the two explorer-pastoralist brothers, the

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1. In December 1880 the *Sydney Bulletin* offered a reward of £1,000 for "clear and unchallengeable information" concerning the lost explorers and for genuine relics of the Expedition. On January 8, 1881, John Richard Skuthorpe sent to the Lands Department in Sydney a telegram claiming that he had found the journals of Leichhardt and Classen, together with other relics. Skuthorpe horsewhipped at Blackall (Qld.) a newspaper editor who doubted his claim. On September 10, 1881, Skuthorpe wrote to Sir Henry Parkes in Sydney offering to sell the alleged relics for £6,000. Parkes replied that a reward commensurate with the value of the relics would be given if and when the relics were produced. Nothing definite resulted. It has never been established what relics of Leichhardt, if any, Skuthorpe possessed.

2. William Carr Boyd (1852-1925), explorer and prospector, was the second son of Dr. William Carr Boyd, a Brisbane medico. In 1873 Carr Boyd was on the Palmer diggings, but subsequently joined W. O. Hodgkinson's expedition (as second-in-command) through North-west Queensland into the Northern Territory. He adopted his pen-name of "Potjostler," which he used in writing articles for the *Queenslander*. As the result of a quarrel with a Russian surveyor attached to Hodgkinson's party, who complained that Boyd was always "potjostling" around the camp. Carr Boyd assisted in stocking cattle stations in the north-west, and in 1880 he was in charge of an expedition which searched unsuccessfully for the Prout Brothers. Later, Carr Boyd spent many years in the Kimberleys and also in the Kalgoorlie country. He was famous not only for his bushcraft and knowledge of aboriginal lore, but also as a spinner of campfire yarns, many of them of the "tall" variety. He died at Cranbourne (Vic.) in May 1925.—Ed.

Prouts, set out on a trip into the unexplored Northern Territory. Both men perished of thirst.[3] Williams saw the bones of one of their horses (still saddled) that had found his way back to water and died after drinking. He was eventually compelled to take his cattle down Linda Creek to Wondetti Lake, a blue bush swamp which had been filled by a storm. The swamp was almost dry, when more rain fell in the Toko Ranges and filled Cockroach Lagoon on the Northern Territory side of the border. Williams moved his cattle, which had been reduced to 1,600, to this waterhole. He had been joined by Mr. Batton, general manager for Barrow Creek Pastoral Company, with a mob of bulls he had bought in Queensland for Simpson's Gap Station. Williams and Batton pushed on to the Waite. Here one of their horses became ill after drinking at a waterhole beside which they had camped.

Batton also became ill and after riding four miles they were compelled to make camp until he recovered. They then struck out for the Plenty River. Here in the sand they sank a well which yielded sufficient water for the cattle in small lots.

They crossed the Hart's Range, but after doing so got into such a jumble of rough stoney hills that their horses, being unshod, they were compelled to retrace their steps.

It was in this area that the explorer Winnecke had formed a depot, but they saw nothing of it although they found a gum tree that had been felled some years previously by someone using a steel axe.

Returning to Cockroach Lagoon, they were forced to abandon one dray because of the roughness of the range. They started with 600 head, the strongest of the cattle. A small lot was taken because of the scarcity of water, and because their passage would make a track that the larger mob could follow over the dry stage.

An Ingenious Water Trough

We now come to an example of simple ingenuity. It was necessary to have a water trough to water their cattle. This was solved by cutting a tarpaulin measur-

3. The poem *Where the Pelican Builds,* by the Queensland poet Mary Hannay Foott, is based on this tragic incident in Queensland pastoral history.—Ed.

ing 15ft. by 12ft. and sewing it together to make a canvas trough, 30ft. by 6ft., to water their cattle at the well.

The water could have been raised from the soak by two methods. On each dray would be a 30-gallon water tank without which no drover travels. This could have been placed in the well and raised to the surface by a "whip," i.e. a rope attached to the bucket and pulled up by a horse and tipped into the trough by hand. Alternatively, if the soak was not deep, the bucket might have been rigged on a long pole with a bag of earth on the opposite end to balance it and the water raised by hand—a faster method than the "whip." A simple and speedy method was evolved to empty the heavy bucket. A hole 18 inches long by 3 inches wide was cut low down on the side. An ordinary sack bag was hung inside the bucket and the weight of the water forced the bag into the hole, preventing the water leaking out. When the water was raised above the trough, someone poked the bag aside with a long stick and set the water gushing out, the bag later falling back into place. A primitive, but effective method. While engaged in the task of watering the cattle Williams records witnessing the eclipse of the moon on 9 March 1884.

In March there was a good fall of rain on the Marshall River, only a few miles away, and they were able to leave the cattle with two men in charge on the water and fresh feed while they returned for the 1,000 head of cattle still beyond the Tarlton Range.

There had been no rain, and they were compelled to wait for the cooler months. Then they had to make one dry stage of 80 miles. Except for the parrakeelya, they could not have made the distance. The parrakeelya is a plant similar to pigweed which grows in poor sandy country and is filled with a green watery substance. Sometimes in this dry country, also, a plentiful supply of water can be obtained in the beds of sandy creeks.

Eventually, all the cattle were brought to the Plenty River. It was learnt subsequently that an expedition equipped with camels had been sent out from the Overland Telegraph in search of them, as it was feared they and the cattle had perished or been speared by the blacks. The party did not make contact with them.

Williams had now established the whole of his herd on the Waite River with sufficient water and grass to maintain them for two months. He and his men were almost without supplies themselves. They had at this time only 10 lb. of flour left, and they were reduced to living on beef and boiled pigweed which was fortunately in abundance.

They estimated that they were now about 100 miles from the Overland Telegraph; they later learned the distance was about 70 miles.

He and Batton with no food, only a few pounds of tea, taking only a riding horse each and a spare horse, set out to explore the country to the Telegraph. They resolved if they were in difficulties when they reached the Overland Telegraph they would cut the wire and thus summon assistance from the line repairers.

Mr. Batton had secured from the Survey Office in Adelaide a copy of the very inaccurate maps of the locality, but it had marked on it the approximate position of an isolated eminence known as Mount Birne.

This, if they were fortunate enough to pass within 20 miles of it, they would be able to see as a landmark standing out on the flat desert country.

It was said to be visible on a clear day from the Overland Telegraph. It was afterwards learned it could only be seen when the linesmen were working at the top of a telegraph pole.

The third day after leaving the cattle, they discovered the tracks of a small mob of cattle—a sure sign that they were approaching outlying settlement. They were the fresh tracks of half-a-dozen cattle, and amongst the tracks of the grown beasts were those of a calf. Williams wrote in his diary "if we find these cattle that calf is doomed to be our next meal."

While engaged in this pleasant task of hunting for a good meal, they came upon a dray road and fresh horse tracks, the first road of any description they had seen since leaving Idamere on the Georgina River in Queensland twelve months before. Abandoning the search for the cattle, they followed the road a few miles and came upon two men erecting a hut and yards on a newly established small sheep station. The men were astonished to see these two rough strangers and enquired if they were survivors of Williams' drovers.

Ridley Williams assured them he was the man himself. It was then they learned of the camel expedi-

tion that had failed to locate them. They were hospitably received; the men at once killed a sheep and prepared for them what Williams and Batton must have considered a banquet.

They were able to obtain supplies and borrow a pack-horse to transport the precious food back to the starving men with the cattle. One of the most welcome articles was some plug tobacco, a commodity they had been without for months.

Williams was able to telegraph the news of his safe arrival to his family whose anxiety would be understandable as they had received no tidings of him for months.

Waterless Stage

Their difficulties were, however, not yet over, as they still had a 70 miles almost waterless stage to cross with the cattle and no parrakeelya to aid them.

This was, however, successfully carried out. Williams relates that a bull was so thirsty that he drank a bucket of hot water on the camp fire in spite of all efforts to drive him away.

After the delivery of the cattle to the representatives of the Barrow Creek Pastoral Company, most of the employees, including the Lowe brothers, travelled down the Overland Telegraph to the railhead, took a ship in Adelaide, and returned to Queensland by sea, via Sydney and Bourke.

The indefatigable Williams and one of his men (Martin) returned over the desert and the Toko Range, gathered up the horses and dray he had abandoned, and returned overland to Bierbank, arriving in February 1885, 20 months after his departure.

Williams commented that everyone seemed pleased to see him.

Cairn at Alice Springs

The feat of Ridley Williams has been recently recognised by the Northern Territory Progress League, which is erecting at Alice Springs a cairn and plaque to commemorate the courage and tenacity of this sterling pioneer.

It is sad to relate that Ridley Williams and his brothers, like many of the early pioneers, failed to reap any reward for their enterprise and hard work.

A Queensland Stock Returns Book of 1898 in the library at Newstead House reveals that in that year Williams Brothers had on Bierbank 12,000 cattle and 175 horses.

They had, following the financial crises of 1893 and the low prices of cattle in the years that followed, become heavily indebted to the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney. On top of this, they had to contend with the great drought that ravaged pastoral Queensland from 1898 to 1902.

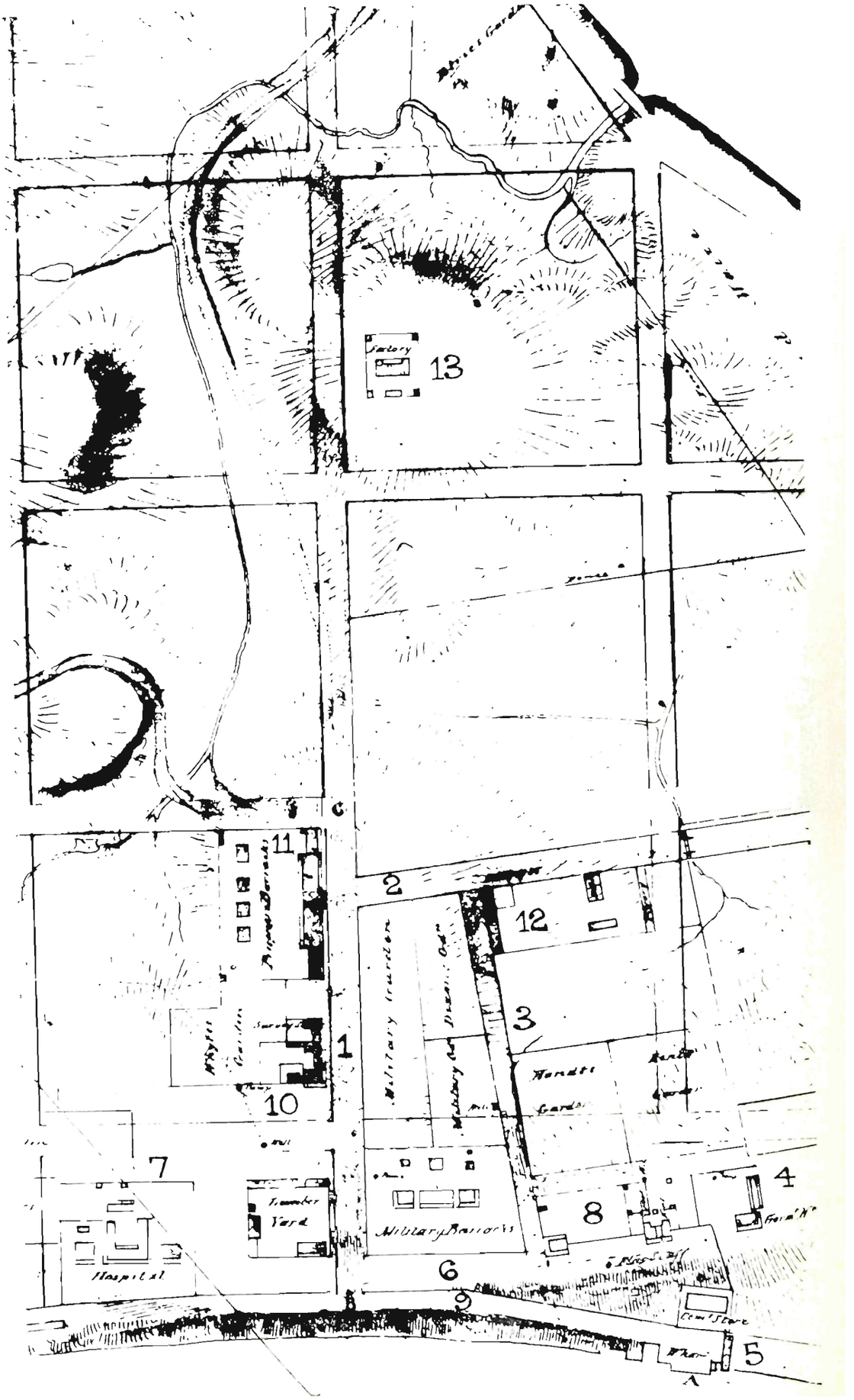
Beechal Creek, the principal water supply on Bierbank, possessed few good waterholes and these dried up during the long dry years.

When beneficial rains fell in the late summer of 1902, they were too late to save the situation. They were only able to muster about 300 head of cattle, and being unable to raise money to restock, they abandoned Bierbank in 1902, the lease of which reverted to the Crown.

Ridley Williams died in South Australia in 1910.

Bierbank was in 1906 secured by tender from the Lands Department by H. B. Coward of Lyssington Station, New South Wales, who paid the bank a few hundreds of pounds for the improvements, put down an artesian bore, and stocked it with sheep. To-day with resumptions its area is reduced to about 350 square miles.

The small township of Cheepie on the Quilpie-Charleville railway stands to-day on a part of the former lease.



LEGEND FOR DIXON'S PLAN OF BRISBANE, 1840

1. Queen Street in original and present alignment. 2. and 3. Albert Street and Elizabeth Street were at an oblique angle to Queen Street: George Street did not exist. 4. Government House. 5. Commissariat Stores. 6. Military Barracks. 7. Hospital. 8. Homes of Rev. Handt and Deputy Assistant Commissary—General Kent. 9. Queen's Wharf Road. 10. Whyte's House (First Postmaster). 11. Prisoners' Barracks. 12. Dixon's Residence. 13. Female Factory.

Note.—The rectangular street system shown on this plan represents a proposed design of Brisbane superimposed on Dixon's original survey.